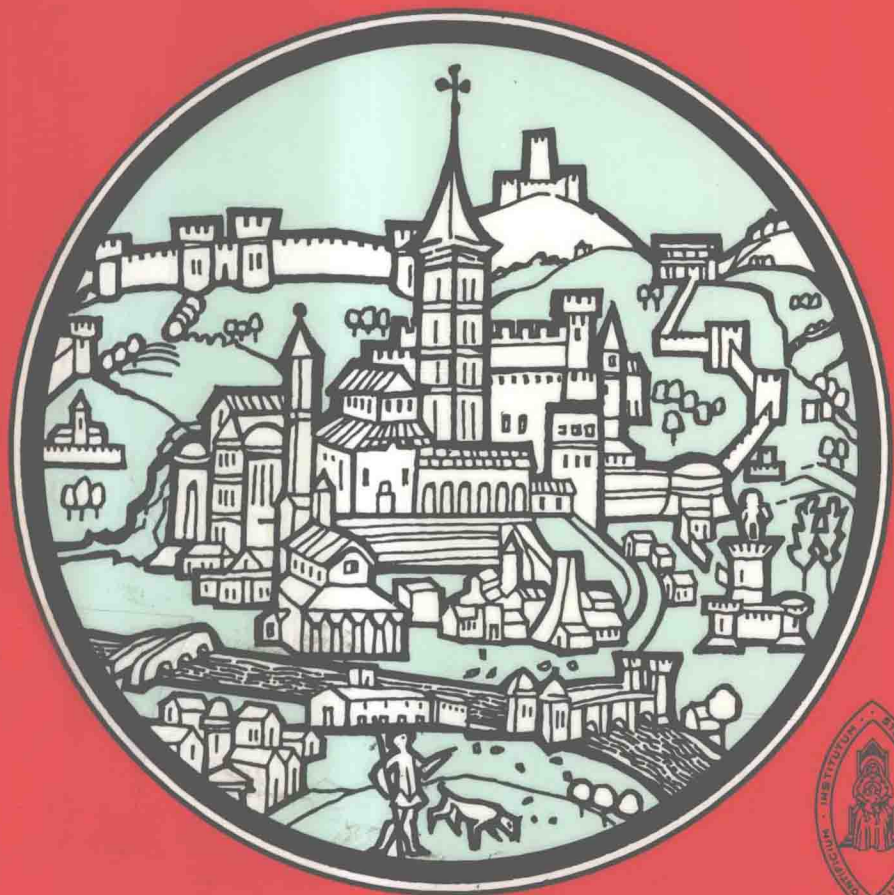


The Life of Cola di Rienzo



MEDIAEVAL SOURCES IN TRANSLATION

18



THE LIFE OF COLA DI RIENZO

Translated with an Introduction

by

JOHN WRIGHT



PONTIFICAL INSTITUTE OF MEDIAEVAL STUDIES

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to Pope Clement in Avignon.
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at his prowess.

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Rome
16 June 1974

INTRODUCTION

Cola di Rienzo, the revolutionary leader of mediaeval Rome, has caught the imagination of historians and poets for hundreds of years. But of all the various attempts to recount his life and explain his character, from the time of Petrarch down to the present day, the most vivid and compelling portrait of this extraordinary figure still remains the anonymous contemporary biography known as the *Life of Cola di Rienzo*. Since the author of the *Life*, with an insouciance which an outsider might claim to be typically Roman, makes no attempt to explain the historical, social, or economic circumstances of his narrative, it should be useful here, by way of introduction, briefly to examine the historical background of fourteenth-century Rome, the personality of Cola di Rienzo and the nature of his revolution of 1347, and finally the literary characteristics of the *Life* itself.

ROME IN THE TIME OF COLA DI RIENZO¹

“How doth the city sit solitary that was full of people? How is the mistress of the Gentiles become as a widow?” With these words Dante opened his epistle of 1314 to the Italian cardinals, quoting the first verse of *Lamentations* and using the image of a widow which was to become the standard metaphor in art and literature for mid-fourteenth-century Rome. The image was an

¹ For the historical background of fourteenth-century Rome see the works by Duprè Theseider, Gregorovius, Mollat, and Morghen listed in the bibliography.

apt one, for the Eternal City in this period was bereaved indeed. No Holy Roman Emperor had ruled from Rome since the time of Otto III (996-1002). The coronation ceremony of Dante's hero, the Emperor Henry VII, had ended in ignominious failure when his partisans were prevented from escorting him to the Vatican by the combined forces of the Angevin King Robert of Naples and the Guelfs of Rome in 1312. The Romans had a brief taste of glory when Louis of Bavaria was crowned Emperor by Sciarra Colonna, Captain of the People of Rome, in 1328. But the unrelenting opposition of Pope John XXII to the Bavarian soon made the citizens regret this act of rash nostalgia; and the Empire itself, already moribund, became a dead letter, at least in Italy, shortly afterward.

Much more important to Rome than the loss of the Empire, however, was the loss of the Popes. The Avignon papacy, initiated in 1305 as a temporary measure under Clement V, began to look more and more permanent, especially to the deserted Romans, as the fourteenth century wore on. Modern research has shown that the fourteenth-century Italians (not to mention many of their descendants) were wrong to believe that the Avignon popes were no more than the base slaves of the kings of France. Their prolonged absence from Rome was rather the result of a combination of accidents: the ill health of one pope or another, the complex politics of the Hundred Years' War, the projected crusade to regain Jerusalem from the Turks, and the geographical convenience of Avignon, which at this time was much closer to the center of Latin Christendom than Rome was. But national hatreds between Frenchmen and Italians played a part in this situation as well, and the long-range problems and aspirations of the transplanted Curia were of little interest to the citizens of a city forced to struggle along without its temporal and spiritual leader for so many years. The economic loss alone was incalculable: the papal court and the visitors it attracted had always been an important source of income to the Romans.

Floods, fires, famine, and earthquakes took their toll during these decades, but more destructive than any of these were Rome's own barons. The endless, anarchic struggles of the great baronial families were a major reason for the popes' reluctance to return to Rome in the first place. The inordinate power of these clans was based on their possession of vast estates and fortresses in the countryside surrounding Rome. Using these as citadels and sources of men and income, they literally tore the city to pieces in their ceaseless struggle for supremacy over one another; Rome was packed with forts, towers, and barricades, built on and with the ruins of antiquity. The alliances of the barons were fluid, but the leaders of one party were usually the Gueff Orsini, who had prevented the Vatican coronation of Henry VII, and of the other the Ghibelline Colonna, who had seized and humiliated Pope Boniface VIII at Anagni in 1303. Ordinary citizens could of course do nothing to stop them; merchants, farmers, and pilgrims were at their mercy. Robbery, murder, and extortion were commonplace; the city was in constant turmoil. This, then, was the stage for the revolution of Cola di Rienzo in 1347.

COLA DI RIENZO

The name Cola di Rienzo (*Cola de Rienzi* in the dialect of Rome) means, approximately, "Nick, Larry's son." The events of the coup d'état engineered in Rome by this innkeeper's son and notary in 1347, and his brief return to power as papal Senator in 1354, are vividly described in the *Life of Cola di Rienzo* and need not be repeated here. But since the Chronicler makes little attempt to analyze his character or his politics, a brief examination of these will be in order at this point.

As a public figure Cola has been variously depicted by modern historians as a protofascist, a forerunner of Garibaldi, and even

as the founder of the entire Renaissance. As an individual he has been called everything from an incompetent madman to a martyred hero.² Personally he will always remain an enigmatic figure: the Chronicler has almost nothing to say about his private life, and Cola's Latin letters, though autobiographical to a certain extent, are essentially public documents, written in a public style, and hence reveal little of his individual personality. But his politics, which at first sight appear so bizarre, can in fact be explained when seen in the context of his times.

Four major political and intellectual elements can be discerned in the short-lived "tribunate" Cola established in 1347.³ First and most important is the idea of Rome. In this he was by no means unique; the belief that Rome was the *caput mundi*, with a central role to play in world politics, was shared by all Romans, even during the most abject periods of the city's history, and indeed by all Christians. The ideal of Rome was all that mattered; political realities, such as the ruinous condition of the city itself, and the shift of political power to the north and west of Europe, could be, and generally were, ignored. But Cola's devotion to this ideal was extraordinary even among his contemporaries; his unusually assiduous attention to the traditions and physical remains of Rome is caught by the Chronicler in his opening chapter on Cola (1.1): "Lord, what a fast reader he was! He was well acquainted with Livy, Seneca, Cicero, and Valerius Maximus; he loved to describe the great

2 For Cola as a protofascist see bibliography for Fleischer; as an abortive forerunner of Garibaldi, Gregorovius; as the founder of the Renaissance, Burdach. The accounts of Barzini, Duprè Theseider, and Morghen are much more balanced. Cola was accused of insanity even by his own contemporaries (cf. Villani 12.90); he was portrayed as a martyred hero by Byron (*Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* 4.114), Bulwer-Lytton, and Wagner.

3 For the material which follows see the works of Cosenza, Davis, Douie, Reeves, Waley, and Weiss listed in the bibliography.